**Teaching Statement** November 14, 2014 **Abby J. Stivers**

Sociology is about understanding the social structures and forces which govern and/or influence every part of our lives. My job as an educator is to pick excellent and engaging pieces of that sociological literature and guide students through the material. I approach course construction with two principles in mind. First, I want students to learn the material. Sociological material specifically has knowledge clearly embedded in the subject matter, so understanding the subject matter itself is a key goal of my teaching. Second, I want students to develop or improve their ability to use the material that they learn to think critically about the world around them.

Getting students to understand course material and use it to engage with society at higher levels is really just two sides of the same coin. I believe by teaching in a way that contextualizes class material with student’s everyday lives and interests, and creating assignments and exams which demand a high level of interaction with the material, students are able to learn more effectively. Contextualizing sociology into student’s everyday lives is something that can only be done through the student’s active participation in course discussions and written reflections. In order to facilitate participation in large classes I intersperse my lectures with questions designed to get them thinking about relevant examples, the logic of arguments or various viewpoints to the material being presented. I also utilize the universities online learning platform- Blackboard to create discussion outside the classrooms. Depending on the class students are required to post questions or guided summaries of the readings or class activities. Through writing prompts and discussion I want to push students to examine their world view in light of the material being discussed. This is not to say that I will be pushing students to agree with however I think about the world, but rather I want them to understand how their opinions could be understood by all opposing arguments. The ability to evaluate arguments and the process of questioning their own assumptions is what I want students to have when they leave my class. If a student comes into my class as a libertarian for example, I want them to leave understanding both the facts that support their world view and the arguments against their view. Sometimes this means standing back and being a moderator for class discussion. Other times this means presenting students with alternative points of view which challenge them develop their positions around logic and facts.

I do not want students to leave my courses thinking that they were “easy.” I want them to leave the course believing that they were challenged. I set exacting standards for students so that I can deal with each one as fairly as possible. I want them to produce excellent work and the only way to get outstanding work from students is to expect outstanding work so I convey to them that I have high expectations for their work in everything I assign. I strive to be professional and available to students in order to create an environment of learning and respect. I respect student’s time as much as possible by constructing assignments that foster growth and learning and do not just produce something to be graded. Part of challenging students is garnering their respect and trust as an instructor. This means doing my best to learn many of their names, bringing myself into the learning space (as opposed to hiding behind the podium) and to give them individual feedback whenever possible.

I believe that the best way to foster critical thinking is through writing and so I assign writing in all of my courses. Whether it is in class assignments or more formal out of class writing assignments I want students to put what they have read or heard into their own words. Writing forces students to think about topics differently than if they are just asked to talk about them. While I strongly believe that every student benefits from an ability to read and write at high levels I know that students have various kinds of learning styles. In order to convey material to students effectively I use a number of different class materials. Lectures, organized notes, power points, documentaries, music videos, graphs and additional reading suggestions.

There has been a lot written about how to get students to engage critically with the academic materials they are presented with and I look forward to learning from more experienced educators and joining the pedagogical conversations regarding critical thinking. I enjoy learning new things about my discipline and my teaching just as much as I like teaching. I believe that once a person learns how to think critically about their world they have the power to change it and/or to have a better life.

Getting students to engage with their views on society is essential to learning about politics and culture, which all of my classes touch on. This engagement can be tricky since students come from a variety of different backgrounds and political views. As the instructor I believe my job is to create a safe atmosphere for students to express themselves. Students should feel comfortable talking about their views and be respectful of other student’s views, even when they disagree. The first step in creating that safe space is to model respect and appreciation for my students. In all of my interactions with students I strive to be professional, to show compassion and to constantly display enthusiasm for our subject.

Along with assignments which encourage integration with the material and an informed pedagogical outlook I also think it is the instructor’s responsibility to get students thinking about every aspect of the college level experience. There is a chasm between a student’s high school experiences and the work and responsibility that is required to succeed in college which I want to help bridge in my teaching. One of the most helpful moments in my undergraduate career was when a professor addressed the fact that some students can seemingly skip classes that do not require attendance anytime they want with few if any visible repercussions. Explaining the structure of college, why classes are the length that they are, how much time should be devoted to studying outside of class, how to get the most out of the time you spend studying, etc. These are the kinds of skills and knowledge that I want to make sure my students are learning in addition to the larger sociological material and improvements in their writing and thinking. A mature and successful college student should be able to manage their own time effectively.